

# Your guide to eating well after a stroke

Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100  
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This guide is for anyone who wants to know more about how your diet can reduce your risk of a stroke. We also talk about how your diet may change after having a stroke and what you can do to help manage changes to your diet.

This information is for people who have had a stroke or transient ischemic attack (TIA or mini-stroke) or are at risk of having one. For more information about how to manage your cholesterol, read our information guide about '**Cholesterol and stroke**'.

## **This guide will cover:**

- How your diet can change after a stroke.
- Managing your diet day-to-day.
- How can healthy eating help me reduce my risk of another stroke?
- How can I eat a healthier diet?
- Tips to help you manage your weight.
- Understanding food labels.
- Other ways to have a healthy lifestyle.
- Where to get help and information.
- Other sources of help and information.
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## **How your diet can change after a stroke**

If you've had a stroke your diet may change. This can happen for many reasons, for example if you have side effects from your stroke. Your thoughts and feelings about food may also change after having a stroke.

A change in your diet after a stroke can be difficult to come to terms with. You may feel overwhelmed, sad, or even angry.

In this section we talk about some of the new challenges you may be experiencing, and how they may impact your diet.

Not everyone who has a stroke will experience all the side effects listed here. Everyone's experience of stroke is different. Talk to your doctor if you're experiencing any symptoms that are affecting your diet since having a stroke.

### **Problems swallowing**

Some people have difficulty swallowing (dysphagia) after they've had a stroke. You may only have problems swallowing certain foods or liquids.

But for others, it may be very difficult to swallow most foods or liquids, or not possible at all. This can be upsetting and hard to deal with. But there is support available that may help.

If you have problems swallowing after a stroke, your hospital team should refer you to a speech and language therapist. They are specialists who support people with swallowing and communication difficulties. Your GP can also refer you to a speech and language therapist if you start having problems swallowing. A dietitian will also be able to give you support and information about your diet if you're having problems swallowing.

For more information, read our information guide, '**Swallowing problems after a stroke**'.

### Loss of appetite

If you've had a stroke, you may notice that your appetite has changed. For example, you may feel less hungry. This may be caused by the stroke, or by other factors such as feeling depressed, tired, anxious or in pain. Having a reduced appetite, and not eating enough food, may mean that you lose weight.

For most people, your appetite will return to normal in time. But if your appetite has changed, talk to your doctor or a dietitian. It's important to give your body the food and nutrients it needs to feel well and energised.

### Change in taste and smell

It's normal to experience some changes to your taste and smell if you've had a stroke.

Taste and smell are senses which play an important role in your diet and enjoyment of food. If these senses change, it can have a big impact on your life. You may stop eating or cooking some of the foods you normally enjoy if you can no longer smell or taste.

These changes may only be temporary and could return as you recover after your stroke. But for some people, changes to your taste and smell may last longer. Medications and tooth or gum infections can also affect your sense of taste or smell.

Talk to your doctor if your taste and smell is different since having a stroke. They may be able to refer you to a dietitian. Read more in our information guide, '**Taste and smell changes after a stroke**'.

### New day-to-day challenges

After a stroke, you may experience some new daily challenges. These may affect your diet, eating habits and hydration.

You may experience some or all of the following:

- Balance problems.
- Cognitive problems (thinking and memory).
- Pain.
- Fatigue (extreme tiredness.)
- Problems with hand-eye coordination.
- Weakness and paralysis (a loss of movement in your body).
- Difficulty shopping, preparing meals and feeding yourself.

All of these things may impact how you shop, cook and eat. You may have to do things differently to how you did them before having a stroke. This can take a while to get used to and can be difficult to deal with, especially if you've always been independent. You may find the online cooking videos on our website useful. They share practical tips and information about cooking after a stroke.

Remember, ask for help if you need it. There are people and places you can go to for support. Your stroke team or GP surgery may be able to refer you to local support services and therapists. Talking to your family or friends about the support you need, can also be helpful.

## Your feelings towards food

How you feel and think about food may change after you've had a stroke. For many of us, food plays an important role in our lives. For example, going to restaurants, sharing food with others, and cooking. For some, food forms part of our identity and has an important cultural role in our lives. If your diet, or the foods you eat, has changed since having a stroke, it can be upsetting and difficult to accept.

If you have swallowing problems, you may have to change how you eat. Your food may need to be mashed or pureed to make it safer to swallow. This can be a very overwhelming experience.

It's normal to experience low mood and anxiety, especially around food and eating. Contact your GP surgery to find out what support is available to you. You may also find it helpful to talk to others who understand what you're going through. Our online community is a place to share your experiences with people in similar situations.

## Managing your diet day-to-day

If you've had a stroke, it can be difficult to adjust to side effects that you may have. If you're worried about side effects after having a stroke, contact your GP surgery.

### Food shopping and planning your meals

After a stroke, you may find it difficult to plan your meals, write shopping lists, and get to the supermarket. Day-to-day tasks may not be as easy as they were before you had a stroke.

If you can, write a shopping list before you go to the shops, or ask a friend, family member or carer to help you. This will help you stay focused when you're shopping.

Planning your meals in advance can be helpful. Batch cooking meals and freezing them is a good way to save time. It also means that you'll have healthy meals available, even on days when you don't feel like cooking or you have less energy.

Online grocery shopping may be a good option for people who find it difficult getting to a supermarket. For example, if you're unable to drive, have mobility issues or have a high risk of falling. Online shopping may also be helpful if you have problems with in-store shopping. For example, carrying a shopping basket, pushing a trolley, or packing your food at the checkout.

Busy supermarkets can feel overwhelming, especially if you don't feel well. Choose items you want in your own time, and have them delivered to your home at a time that suits you. Family, friends or carers may also be able to help by ordering your online shopping for you.

### Cooking for yourself and your family

After having a stroke, you may have to change the way you cook and prepare food. The following side effects may affect the way you cook and prepare food:

- Weakness in your arms or paralysis (a loss of movement in your body).
- A smaller appetite.
- Changes to your taste and smell.
- Problems swallowing.
- Changes to your memory.
- Balance problems.
- Pain and fatigue (extreme tiredness).

These changes may be difficult to adjust to, especially if you normally enjoy cooking. If you're finding it difficult to cook, you could try ordering some pre-prepared meals to your home. You can buy them online and they often arrive frozen, ready to be cooked in a microwave or oven.

### Check out our online cooking videos

For more information about cooking, and healthy recipe ideas, watch our videos online. The videos show you how to cook healthy meals after you've had a stroke. Your family and friends may also find them useful.

### Food and medication

Some types of medication can be affected by the foods you eat. If you've had a stroke or TIA you should be offered statin treatment, unless there are other medical reasons which means they are not suitable for you. If you take statins, ask a pharmacist if you need to avoid any certain foods or drinks, for example grapefruit juice and alcohol. If you have problems with your statin treatment, speak to your GP.

If you take warfarin, talk to your doctor before changing your diet.

## How can healthy eating help me reduce my risk of another stroke?

Having a well-balanced diet can help you feel better and reduce your risk of having another stroke. Eating healthily can also help you to manage:

- High blood pressure.
- Diabetes.
- High cholesterol.
- Being overweight.

A well-balanced diet may also help you feel less fatigued (extreme tiredness) and reduce your risk of having bladder and bowel problems.

## How can I eat a healthier diet?

In this section we talk about foods you should include in your diet, and foods you should try to reduce. If you need help with your diet, contact your GP surgery. They may be able to refer you to a dietitian.

### Fruit and vegetables

Adding a portion of fruit and vegetables to your daily diet can reduce your risk of stroke by up to 10%. Every extra portion you eat reduces your risk even further. You should aim to eat at least five portions of a variety of fruits and vegetables each day.

If you don't normally eat a lot of fruit or vegetables, try gradually increasing the number of portions you eat. You could take a piece of fruit to work, add a salad to your lunch or try making a simple homemade vegetable soup. Even small changes and simple swaps will help.

### What are the benefits?

Fruit and vegetables contain a range of vitamins, minerals and fibre. These include antioxidants such as vitamins A, C and E and beta-carotene, which may help to prevent damage to your arteries.

You don't need to take supplements to get enough antioxidants. Try to eat a range of foods containing the vitamins you need.

### What is a portion?

One portion of fruit or vegetables weighs about 80g. For example, a portion may include the following:

- An apple or two plums, a handful of berries, or three heaped tablespoons of fruit salad.
- 30g or one heaped tablespoon of dried fruit.
- A glass of fruit juice or smoothie (150ml) counts as a maximum of one daily portion. This is because it is low in fibre and contains a lot of natural sugars.

- Three heaped tablespoons of raw, cooked or tinned vegetables.
- A dessert bowl of salad.

### Tips for eating more fruit and vegetables

You may find it difficult eating five portions of fruit or vegetables a day. But some simple swaps and things you can try may make it easier and more enjoyable.

- Try replacing crisps and chocolate with healthy snacks. For example, a piece of fruit or raw carrot sticks with humous.
- Choose a colourful variety of fruits and vegetables. This will help you to get a range of vitamins and minerals, including antioxidants. You could try carrots, apricots, berries, broccoli or red peppers.
- Tinned fruit and vegetables count towards your five a day. Choose fruit in natural juice rather than syrup, and vegetables in water with no added salt or sugar.
- Frozen vegetables and fruit are full of the same nutrients and fibre as fresh. They are often cheaper to buy than fresh and you have less food waste. Try adding some frozen berries to porridge, or frozen chopped vegetables to a homemade pasta sauce.

### Salt

Salt contains sodium which helps to keep your body fluids at the right level. Too much salt increases the amount of fluid that your body stores. This raises your blood pressure.

High blood pressure (hypertension) is the single biggest risk factor for stroke. It causes the walls of your arteries to harden and narrow. This increases the risk of blood clots forming. A clot can travel to the brain and cause a stroke (ischaemic stroke). High blood pressure also puts a strain on the walls of the arteries inside your brain. This increases your risk of a blood vessel bursting and bleeding into the brain. This is called a haemorrhagic stroke.

Eating too much salt can increase your risk of a stroke by up to 25%, even if your blood pressure is normal. By reducing the amount of salt that you eat, you can lower your blood pressure and your risk of stroke. For more information, read our guide '**High blood pressure and stroke**'.

### How much salt do I need?

You should eat no more than 6g of salt a day, or about a teaspoon. Remember, there is a large amount of hidden salt found in processed and ready-made foods.

A quick way to keep track of your salt intake is by reading the salt content on the food labels. Salt could be listed as either salt or sodium. Sodium is always a smaller number than salt, so multiply it by 2.5 to get the amount of salt.

- A high amount of salt is more than 1.5g per 100g, or 0.6g sodium.
- A low amount of salt is 0.3g per 100g, or 0.1g sodium.

Read more about understanding food labels on **page 9**.

Try making some of the following changes to reduce the amount of salt in your diet.

- When comparing two similar products, go for the one with the lowest salt content – small changes can make a big difference.
- Avoid adding salt to your food during cooking and at the dinner table.
- Try using herbs, spices, garlic or lemon juice to add flavour instead of salt.
- Make your own sauces, pickles or chutney to control how much salt goes in.
- Choose tinned fish in spring water instead of brine.
- Avoid high salt foods, supermarket ready-made meals, and processed meat such as bacon and sausage. Many everyday foods have a high salt content, such as cheese, tinned and packet soup, stock cubes and savoury snacks.

### Fibre

Including fibre in your diet can help to reduce your risk of stroke. It also helps to keep blood sugar levels stable and helps you manage your weight. It can also help with constipation and keeping your immune system strong.

Adults should aim to eat about 30g of fibre every day. One portion of fibre is about 7g. That is equivalent to a standard portion of wholemeal pasta (70g) or two slices of wholemeal bread.

If you don't eat much fibre, adding an extra portion to your daily diet can reduce your risk of stroke by up to 10% over time.

You can find fibre in plant-based foods. The amount of fibre in food is usually written on the label. Sometimes, people may refer to fibre as insoluble and soluble fibre.

- **Soluble fibre** delays the time it takes for you to digest food, making you feel fuller for longer. It can regulate blood sugar levels and help reduce cholesterol. It does this by binding to excess cholesterol and fatty substances in the gut. This stops them from going into your bloodstream. You can find soluble fibre in grains like oats, barley and rye. Fruit, vegetables, beans, pulses and peas are other good sources of soluble fibre.
- **Insoluble fibre** shortens the time it takes for food to move through the bowel. It can also improve the balance of good bacteria in the gut. To boost your intake, try eating the skin on fruit and vegetables. Go for wholegrain varieties of starchy foods like pasta and bread, and cook potatoes with the skin on.

### Wholegrains

Including wholegrains in your diet can help to prevent type 2 diabetes, heart disease and weight gain. Wholegrains are a good source of B-vitamins and folic acid, as well as both types of fibre (soluble and insoluble).

To make white flour or white rice, the brown outer skin of the grain is removed. This skin is where most of the fibre, vitamins and minerals are stored. This is why wholegrain foods tend to contain more vitamins and minerals than refined foods like white bread and white pasta.

Try some of the following tips to help get more wholegrains in your diet.

- Start off by adding wholegrains into some of your main meals. Try brown rice, brown pasta and wholewheat couscous.
- Look for wholegrain breakfast cereals.
- Choose wholegrain bread, and try bread made with rye and other grains.
- Oats can help lower cholesterol. Oat bran, rye and barley all help too. Try eating a couple of oatcakes as a snack or adding barley into a stew.

If you cannot eat gluten or wheat, try alternative grains such as buckwheat, corn, rice, quinoa and millet.

### Sugar

Some foods and drinks contain a lot of added sugar. You may hear these called 'free sugars'. Free sugars are added sugars and sugars found naturally in foods such as honey, syrups, unsweetened fruit and vegetable juices, smoothies and purées.

Eating too much sugar in your diet, may mean that you're eating too many calories. This can cause weight gain, which increases your risk of stroke, heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

Foods which often contain added sugar include:

- Fizzy drinks and some squashes – a high intake of sugary drinks can increase your risk of stroke by around 10%.
- Ready-made pasta sauces.
- Cereals like muesli, cornflakes and granola.
- Tomato ketchup and baked beans.
- Some foods sold as 'low fat' may contain extra sugar.

Try to limit your sugar intake by eating no more than 30g of added sugar a day. This is about seven teaspoons of sugar. This may sound a lot, but one can of fizzy drink may contain more than eight teaspoons.

### Protein

The NHS Eatwell Guide recommends that you eat one portion of protein every day. One portion of protein weighs about 90g, which will roughly cover the palm of your hand.

Protein is found in food like meat, fish, eggs, pulses and beans. Dairy products, nuts, and meat alternatives also include protein. When thinking about how to include protein in your diet, consider the following:

- Aim to keep your intake of saturated fat low by choosing lean cuts of meat.
- Aim for two servings of fish per week including one of oily fish like mackerel, salmon or trout.

Red meat can be a good source of protein and nutrients. However, research shows that eating more than four portions of red meat a week can increase your risk of stroke.

If you regularly eat processed meat, it's a good idea to cut down. Eating processed meat, such as sausages or bacon, may increase your risk of stroke by around 17%.

If you don't eat meat or fish, beans and pulses are a good alternative. As well as protein, they also contain soluble fibre that can help lower your cholesterol. Beans and pulses also contain vitamins and minerals. Three heaped tablespoons can contribute towards one of your recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.

Nuts are a source of protein as well as healthy fats. But remember that they are high in calories, so you only need a small portion.

### Fat

We all need a small amount of fat in our diet. It is a valuable source of energy and it helps the body absorb certain nutrients. It can also provide substances called essential fatty acids that the body cannot make itself.

However, too much fat in your diet may mean that you're eating too many calories. This can cause weight gain, which can increase your risk of stroke. Below we talk about the different types of fats and what they do.

### Unsaturated fats

Unsaturated fats are mainly found in fish and in plant-based foods, like nuts and seeds or the oils that come from them. Unsaturated fats tend to be oils, not solid fats.

Eating small amounts of unsaturated fats can help to prevent blocked arteries and blood clots, which can cause strokes.

### Saturated fats

Saturated fats are usually solid. They can raise cholesterol in your blood, which can lead to blocked arteries and heart disease.

Saturated fats are mainly found in meat and dairy products. This includes fatty red meat, processed meats (like sausages and meat pies), butter, cream and cheese. Palm oil, coconut oil and ghee are also high in saturated fat.

Reducing the amount of saturated fat in your diet, will help keep your heart healthy. Instead, try eating more foods that contain healthy fats, such as salmon, sardines and avocado.

### Omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids

Omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids are types of polyunsaturated fat. These are known as essential fatty acids. They play an important role in the body. They help to keep artery walls healthy, regulate blood clotting, and lower blood pressure.

Omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids tend to be found in oils from fish or plants. A good source is oily fish, but they are also found in nuts and seeds such as walnuts and flax seeds, and soya products.

There is no strong evidence to say for sure if omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids reduce the risk of stroke. However, research has shown that together they work well at managing 'good' and 'bad' cholesterol in your body.

### Trans fats

Trans fats are artificial fats which are mostly found in processed foods like cakes, biscuits, margarine and fast foods. Trans fats can raise the 'bad' cholesterol and reduce the 'good' cholesterol in your blood. This can increase your risk of stroke and heart disease.

Trans fats get made from liquid oils being turned into a solid fat by a process called hydrogenation. They are usually called hydrogenated fats on food labels.

For more information about how to manage your cholesterol, read our information guide, '**Cholesterol and stroke**'.

### Staying hydrated

It's important to stay hydrated. The NHS Eatwell Guide recommends that you drink 6 to 8 cups or glasses of fluid a day. Water, low-fat milk and sugar-free drinks, including tea and coffee, all count.

It's important that you drink enough throughout the day, especially in warmer weather. If you don't drink enough, you may become dehydrated, which can make you very ill.

If you're having problems swallowing, staying hydrated may be particularly difficult. Contact your stroke team or GP surgery as they may be able to refer you to a speech and language therapist. Or for more information, read our information guide, '**Swallowing problems after a stroke**'.

## Tips to help you manage your weight

Staying at a healthy weight is important for your general health. There are things you can do to help you keep your weight under control.

### Managing your weight

Being overweight or obese increases your risk of many health conditions, including high cholesterol, stroke and type 2 diabetes.

If you've had a stroke and are overweight or obese, try making gradual changes to your diet and exercise habits. This will help you lose weight and maintain a healthy lifestyle long-term. Contact your GP surgery if you need help or support losing weight.

The NHS website has information about body mass index (BMI), including a calculator which works out the ideal weight range for your height.

The following tips may help you maintain a healthy weight:

- Eat balanced meals with plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrains.
- Try to cook your own food if you can, so you can keep fat, sugar and salt low.
- Keep takeaways for occasional treats.
- Choose low fat options for milk, cheese, yoghurts, spreads and salad dressings. But remember, some low-fat options are high in sugar – look at the food label if you're not sure.
- Choose lean cuts of meat and trim off visible fat. Replace fatty cuts of red meat with leaner things like chicken and turkey.
- Steam, grill, bake, poach or simmer, rather than frying your food.
- Try to eat only as much as you need. If you consume more calories than your body needs, then the extra energy is usually stored as fat. This will cause you to gain weight.
- Use smaller plates and bowls to help control your portion sizes.
- Try to do some form of exercise every day.
- Reduce your alcohol intake. Read more about alcohol on [page 10](#).

For more ideas and healthy recipes, **watch our cooking videos on our website**.

### Avoiding weight loss

After having a stroke, you may have a smaller appetite or feel differently towards food. Both can lead to you eating less, which can cause weight loss.

It's important for your general health that you try to stay at a healthy weight. If you're having problems eating, or you're losing weight unintentionally, contact your GP surgery. They may be able to refer you to a dietitian. They will be able to give you support and information about how to avoid weight loss. For example, eating foods which are smaller in portion size and easy to eat, but high in calories.

If you're losing weight, eating foods that you enjoy is important. It's also important that you stay hydrated – drink plenty of fluids so you do not become dehydrated. If you have difficulty swallowing, talk to your doctor or speech and language therapist about ways you can safely stay hydrated.

### Understanding food labels

Most pre-packed foods have a nutrition label on the packaging. These labels must include information on energy (calories), protein, carbohydrate, sugars, fat, saturated fat and salt. They may also provide additional information on fibre.

All nutritional information is provided per 100g or 100ml. Sometimes there is information listed per portion of the food.

Many nutritional labels use the traffic light colour coding system (red, amber, green). This tells you at a glance if the food has high, medium or low amounts of fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt. The more green that you see on a label, the healthier the food.

Remember, ingredients are usually listed from the largest amounts first to the smallest amounts last. So, the lower down the list of ingredients something is, the less is in the food. If sugar is near the top of the list, it's likely to be a high-sugar food.

### Other ways to have a healthy lifestyle

As well as managing your diet and eating well, it's also important to make other lifestyle changes where you can. In this section we talk about other changes you can make to help you feel better and reduce your risk of having another stroke.

#### Being active and exercising

Keeping active can improve your fitness, help you stay a healthy weight and can lift your mood. Being a healthy weight can also help to reduce your risk of stroke and type 2 diabetes, and can lower your cholesterol.

Even a small amount of physical activity can make a difference, for example pottering in the garden, gentle stretches or walking slowly. Try being active every day and reduce the time that you spend sitting. Take things at your own pace. You may want to check with your doctor if you're worried about starting a new physical activity.

#### Reducing alcohol

Cutting down alcohol can reduce your risk of health conditions, including stroke. It can also help reduce tiredness and improve your mood.

The NHS recommends that adults in the UK drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week, spread across at least three days. One pint of beer and one small glass of wine are about 2 units of alcohol each. People who have had a stroke should have no more than 2 units of alcohol a day. Contact your GP surgery if you need help cutting down your alcohol.

#### Stopping smoking

Smoking increases your risk of certain health conditions, including stroke. If you smoke, try stopping or reducing how much you smoke.

You're more likely to quit for good if you use a stop smoking service. Your GP surgery can support you and can tell you about stop smoking services in your area. Visit the NHS website for more information.

#### Managing stress and anxiety

Research shows that stress and anxiety can have a negative impact on your diet and weight, as you may eat more. For example, if you're very stressed you may eat more which could lead to weight gain.

It's normal to experience some stress and anxiety from time to time. But if you're not well, or recovering from a stroke, it may cause extra stress for you and your family. Contact your GP surgery if you're worried about your stress levels or anxiety.

#### Improving your sleep

Sleep plays an important role in our health. We need enough sleep to feel well and energised. Poor sleep can affect our diet and weight, which can lead to health problems. Adults need between 7 to 9 hours. If you're having problems sleeping, contact your GP surgery.

## Where to get help and information

### From the Stroke Association

#### Helpline

Our Helpline offers information and support for anyone affected by stroke, including family, friends and carers.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**,  
from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100**  
Email **helpline@stroke.org.uk**

#### Read our information

Log onto **stroke.org.uk**, where you can find easy-to-understand information, videos and an online community to support you.

You can also call the Helpline to ask for printed copies of our guides.

## Other sources of help and information

### Action on Salt

Website: **actiononsalt.org.uk**

Telephone: **020 7882 5941**

Information about salt and how to reduce how much you eat.

### British Dietetic Association

Website: **bda.uk.com**

Telephone: **0121 200 8080**

Provides factsheets on various aspects of diet and nutrition, including cholesterol.

### British Heart Foundation

Website: **bhf.org.uk**

Telephone: **0300 330 3311**

Information and support about how to manage your weight.

### NHS website

Website: **nhs.uk**

Information from the NHS about food, diet and cholesterol.

### About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.

#### How did we do?

To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at [feedback@stroke.org.uk](mailto:feedback@stroke.org.uk)

#### Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.

#### Always get individual advice

This guide contains general information about stroke. But if you have a problem, you should get individual advice from a professional such as a GP or pharmacist. Our Helpline can also help you find support. We work very hard to give you the latest facts, but some things change. We don't control the information provided by other organisations or websites.

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